

Civil War Wife: the Letters of Harriet Jane Thompson

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Civil War Wife: The Letters of Harriet Jane Thompson

Part I

edited by **Glenda Riley**

Like so many other women in Iowa's past, Harriet Jane Thompson's life and thoughts have been pushed into the shadows of history by the dramatic public achievements of her husband, Major William G. Thompson. It was only by happenstance that a bundle of her Civil War letters was included in a sizable gift of his letters and other war memorabilia to the Division of Historical Museum and Archives in Des Moines some years ago. Shortly thereafter, his letters to her detailing his service in the Twentieth Iowa Volunteer Infantry were published by Edwin C. Bearss under the title Dear Jane. (A selection of these letters appeared in the Fall 1966 Annals.)



But Jane's poignant letters to him relating the trials and

vicissitudes of a childless young wife, suddenly bereft of her husband, moldered in the manuscript box, even temporarily forgotten by her grandson, the original donor of the materials. Thanks, however, to the current interest in the lives of our female ancestors spawned by recent developments in women's history, Jane Thompson's 1862 letters were resurrected. They are presented here as a memorial to the lonely and frustrated women stranded on the home front during the Civil War years.

Unfortunately, little is known about Jane Thompson's life. She was born Harriet Jane Parsons on June 30, 1836 in upstate New York. At fourteen years of age she moved with her family to Marion, Iowa, perhaps in search of richer land and a brighter future. William G. Thompson was born on January 17, 1830 in Pennsylvania, was admitted to the bar in 1852, and relocated later that year in Marion, Iowa with bright hopes of a lucrative law practice and a future in Republican politics. Harriet Jane and William were married on June 12, 1856 and established their home in Marion.

In August of 1854, William was elected prosecuting attorney of Linn County, a post he held until 1856 when he was elected to the state senate on the Republican ticket. After two years of service he returned to Marion, his law practice, and a judgeship in Linn County, where he was soon embroiled in Republican politics, anti-Southern sentiment, and war fever.

Throughout these early and somewhat chaotic years of their marriage the Thompsons remained childless, a situation which may have exacerbated Jane's loneliness during her husband's frequent absences. In 1862 when he decided to aid in the organization of the Twentieth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, she was not entirely supportive of his venture. When he left Marion during the summer of 1862 he suggested that she travel to Pennsylvania to visit his parents, brothers, sisters, their spouses, and other relatives living in McCandless and Butler.

Her letters to him begin in August of 1862 shortly after his departure. They run the gamut from pride in his achievements as the elected Major of the regiment to worries about his

health and moral well-being; from complaints about her own problems and needs, to pleas, demands, and wiles designed to entice him to return to her side as soon as possible.

On December 7, 1862, he was severely wounded at the Battle of Prairie Grove in Arkansas. By that time Jane had returned, somewhat against his wishes, to her own family in Marion, Iowa although she did not have the heart (and perhaps the funds) to live in their homestead alone. This particular segment of her letters ends before she learns the full extent of his injury, but there are some later, and as yet untranscribed letters which chronicle her fears and dismay during William's recuperation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, his eventual return to active duty in the siege of Vicksburg, and his term of service as commandant at Padre Island, Texas.

Her dreams of his homecoming were finally realized when he was allowed to resign in May of 1864 due to the unrelenting after-effects of his 1862 injury. He returned to his law practice in Marion, but the couple was soon struck by another disaster, the death of their first born child, William Chester Thompson, in early infancy. Jane later bore a healthy second child, John McCandless Thompson, on May 24, 1875.

William gradually realized some of his long-standing political ambitions through election to the United States Congress in 1879 and appointment to the judgeship of the Eighteenth Judicial District of Iowa in 1894. Jane died on February 27, 1897, William died on April 2, 1911, and their son John died on August 23, 1962.

Jane Thompson's 1862 letters to her husband are published here with the permission and cooperation of her grandson, William G. Thompson, presently of Mt. Vernon, Iowa. The grammar and spelling have been altered slightly to facilitate reading and minor references to family and friends have been deleted, but the personality in the letters, ranging from witty to whiny, is definitely that of Harriet Jane Parsons Thompson.

The letters are being presented in two parts. Part I concludes with the September 19, 1862 letter. Part II contains letters for the months of October, November, and December, 1862.

Marion, Iowa, August 11th, 1862

Dear William,

I received your kind letter that you sent up by George. I was very much disappointed when I read your letter and found that you could not come home Saturday. I hope you will try and come one day this week. Mrs. Sessions told me that she had a letter from Miss Sessions a few days ago and that you had called on her and that she had been in Camp several times to see you. I felt very much hurt for I thought that if you could spend time to go and see her

that you could come home and see me. If I have done anything to keep you away please tell me. I suppose you knew that she was coming home this week. But I shall not call on her for I do not think she is the right kind of a girl to try to win my Husband's affections when she knows I am not present. She knows how dear you are to me for one day that you are away seems like a week and it is the truth. It was a sad day when the soldiers started away. It seemed like Sunday all day. There was a number of them got to feeling pretty well with liquor before they left.

I hope you will excuse this bad writing for I have a very sore thumb. I thought at first it was going to be a felon, but I hope it will not. I have not slept much with it for a few nights because it pained me so. I can hardly hold my pen and it pains me so that I cannot keep a steady hand.

You said for me to borrow what money I wanted to go visit your family. I do not know how much it takes to go from here to Pennsylvania and I do not know how much I want. Please write soon and *come home if you possibly can*. Good bye, Billie.



William G. Thompson

Jane

Marion, August 13th, 1862

Dear William,

I received your kind but brief letter just a short time ago and as it was storming so that I could not sleep I thought I would write a few words to you. Miss Ames and Mr. Ramsey are both in the parlor. She came up from the Rapids yesterday and says she is going to help me get ready to go to Pennsylvania. I want you to be sure and get me your likeness. Get a photograph if you can. I felt very bad and lowly the day you left. I tried to control my feelings but I could not and I hope you will pardon me. I wished tonight that you was at home. I wonder how many times I will wish that between now and Spring. But I hope you will take good care of yourself and stay until you are satisfied. I am proud to think I have a Husband that wants to fight for his Country. . . .

I am getting ready as fast as I can to go to your family's home. . . . I will have someone bring your Buffalo robe for I forgot it the day you started. They thrashed 12 bushels of our wheat this afternoon and would have finished it tomorrow had it not rained. But I must close. You did not say as you were well. I want you to tell me when you get sick. Will you? Write soon and often as you can. Good night.

Jane



Butler, Pennsylvania, August 28th, 1862

Dear William,

I have just got to Butler this afternoon and I thought I would just drop you a short line. I got to Pittsburgh Wednesday morning about ½ past two in the morning. I staid at Pittsburgh yesterday and came to Butler today. I found everyone well. Solomon was here and said they were well at home and he will be down for me Saturday. I had no trouble at all. But as I am very tired I will close and write again in a day or two. I thought I would just let you know that I was here.

Please write soon and often as you can and write when you get sick.

Jane



Butler, August 30th, 1862

Dear William,

I wrote you a short note the evening I got here but I thought you would want to hear from me again. I directed my other letter to Benton Barracks and I have worried so for fear you would not be there to get it. I looked for one from you last night but I was disappointed. I felt a little homesick last night and I do hope Solomon will be down for me today for I have heard nothing but complaining since I got here. When it is not about her (Lauretta) being sick and about her wishing she was strong as I am, it is about John being gone to war and I have got tired and sick of it. Just as though her husband was any better to go than mine and I do not think that she loves him any more but I would rather have my husband in the army than a coward by my side although it is very lonely. It is the first thing in the morning and the last thing when I go to bed wondering where you are and if you are well. I hope you will take good care of yourself and be careful and not take cold for you had a cough when I was there and if you are not careful you will be ill. . . .

I have had quite a number of calls since I came and they all seem glad to see me. Charles McCandless is Father to a young daughter but a few days old. . . . Do you not wish you had married a Butler girl? Then you could have had all the children you wanted but I am very glad now that we never had any for if you should never get home from the war I will have no children to support but I hope you will be ready to come home by Spring. . . .

There was no one hardly travelling both nights that I was on the train. There was a great many soldiers got on the cars to go a short distance and they were all about as tight as they

could get and the first night George Wilson's hat came up missing and they were sitting near him. Whether *they* got it or not I do not know. Ed Lyon has gone to war and is Captain of a company. Will Campbell and Will Lyon have gone. In fact there are not one left hardly. We stopped at Mrs. Lyon's when we came from Pittsburgh and she was feeling quite bad to think both of her boys had gone. . . . I do not want you to forget to get me your photograph. Write soon and often, won't you? Your letters do me so much good. Take good care of yourself and do not forget your

loving wife,
Jennie Thompson

P.S. I wish I could put in a kiss for you.



McCandless, Pennsylvania, September 3rd, 1862

Dear Billy,

I wrote you just a few days ago but if you look for and think about getting letters as much as I do these that I write will not come amiss. We are well this morning with the exception of your Mother. She is not well but she still goes about. She has not been in the barn this summer so you can form some idea how she is. If she had been well as common you know she cannot be well if she keeps as quiet as that. They are putting in their Fall wheat today. There was quite a hard frost last night. They are afraid it will hurt the buckwheat and corn. It was a very hard frost and it is cold this morning. I am going to wash this morning and I heat the water down by the spring and I am waiting for the ground to dry off a little for fear of getting the neuralgia for I had it last night and oh, but it made me homesick. I think I am a great baby this time for I am not contented anyplace but I will try and stand it for a little while. . . .

I am still hoping that you may come home for I think if you do not come this Fall you will not come for some time. To tell

you the truth your Mother cannot stand it until another summer. I do not think but I may be mistaken. I hope I may. I am at a stand to know where to send this letter. I have already sent three to St. Louis and I do not know what to do. Please write just as often as you can for you know Billy I would rather hear from you than anyone else. If I get one every day I will not grumble. I want you to be sure and write me if you get sick. Will you? Do come home if you can. Write soon and do not forget your loving wife,

Jane

P.S. Excuse my bad writing for my hand trembles this morning for I feel quite weak. I have for a few days for some reason or other. Save a kiss for me.



McCandless, September 7th, 1862

My Dear Husband,

I received two letters from you last night. . . . I was very glad to receive them indeed. I was glad to hear that you was on your road to Benton Barracks for I have sent three letters there. I am well and so are the rest as well as usual. Mother was not so well yesterday but she is little better this morning. If she knew I was writing you about her not being as well as common she would not let me send it but I would not feel right if I did not let you know how she was. I am in hopes when you get to Benton Barracks if they are going to stay there any length of time that you can come up home for a short time. I have very pleasant times with you in my dreams and that is every night and it worries me a great deal for I never done such a thing before as to dream every night but I have not missed a night since I left you. I am afraid that you are going to be sick or that you are never going to get home. I think from your letters you do not sleep enough to dream about me or anyone else but you do not have time to think so much about me as I do you. Do you not think of our bed at home when you lay down on your cot? Every night that I lay down I wonder where you are and

what kind of a place you have to sleep. But I hope we may both live to see the day when you can be at home with me.

Solomon has got in his wheat and he is now ploughing ground for something else. I do not know what. I have not heard from home since I left. I do not know why. . . .

I think it must have kept you busy to get ready to move so quick from Clinton. It must have been quite a job. Will you let me give you a little advice. I am younger than you and whenever we were at home if I said anything to you about drinking you did not like it and thought you knew when to drink and when not but please do not get in the habit of it. You are just as apt to get in that habit as anyone. Now do not be angry at what I have said for it is all in kindness. But I must close as it is nearly church time. Write soon and often and long letters. Take good care of yourself and remember your loving wife.

Jane



Butler September 11, 1862

My Dear Husband,

I am seated again to write you a few lines. I wrote you eight pages yesterday and I do not know as you will thank me for writing so often. But I felt like having a talk with you, so I just began. I am well and so are the rest here. Father sent your letter to me yesterday and as he said nothing about Mother, I suppose she is better. Laretta and I went up street yesterday afternoon. We went to see Mary Sullivan and her Mother. Found them well but very sad on account of Aaron's death. Mary is more so than her Mother. They both very kindly inquired about you, and hoped you would get home safe. And have your health. We went to see Charles McCandless' wife and baby. Found them both well. Her baby is about two weeks old. Looks precisely like Charles. They think it is one *of the* baby's. Do you wish we had one? I am very glad now. The way things have turned out that we have none. For I am lonely enough and feel bad enough without having a baby to think about.

Butter Sept 11th 1862.

"My Dear Husband."

I am seated again to write you a few lines. I wrote you eight pages yesterday, and I do not know as you will thank me for writing so often, but I felt like having a talk with you, so I just began. I am well, & so are the rest here. Father sent your letter to me yesterday, and as he said nothing about Mother, I supposed she is better. Lauretta and I went up street yesterday afternoon, we went to see Mary Sullivan, and her Mother, found them well but very sad on account of Harold's death. Mary is more so than her Mother, they both very kindly inquired about you, and hoped you would get home safe, and have your health. We went to see Charles McCandless wife and baby.

A page from one of Jane's letters in her own hand.

They just commenced drilling here tonight. The Governor has given orders that every able-bodied man should drill so as to be ready to move at an hour's warning. There is some talk of the rebels taking Baltimore and there is considerable excitement in Harrisburgh about them. I think that is coming pretty near home. Oh, how I wish this war was over. Everyone is in continual excitement and fear all the time. My fear is that you will get sick but take the best of care of yourself. I dreamed last night you were sick and I started to come to you but I could not get started. I got to the cars and they were so full I could hardly get in but I did get a seat and then they were so heavily-loaded they could not run and it seemed as though I could hear you calling me to come to you quick and I woke up crying. You cannot imagine how glad and thankful I was to find it only a dream still I have felt worried all day for fear something is going to happen but I hope not.

I am still hoping you can get a furlough to come home. I should think you could. Do not get one shorter than three weeks for it will take you some little time to come and go and indeed it would be a pleasure to have you stay longer but I will not be selfish when I know that our country needs you. I will be satisfied with the length of time that you think you can stay. But come if you can for I must see you if I have to come where you are. I wish you could only say I might. You would see me there in less than a week. Can you tell me why it is that I want to see you so much more than I ever did before? Have you got me your Photograph yet? Please send it to me in your next. Get one about as long as your finger to send in a letter and then you can get a larger one when you like. But be sure and get one. When you write again tell me if you received any of my letters that I sent down to Missouri before you went. I am afraid you will not for I did not put St. Louis on any of them. But I must close for this time. Take good care of yourself. Do you think you would push me away now if I was where I could kiss you? But keep one for me and remember me as your loving wife.

Jennie Thompson



Butler, September 13th, 1862

My Dear William,

I did not write you yesterday so I have began bright and early this morning. There is no one up in the house but the serving girl. I am well and so are the rest here. Lauretta still keeps complaining but I do not think she is dangerous. She has an arm now larger than mine so you must know that is good-sized and her cheeks are as red as can be. Gert Lyon is here. She was here when I first got here and is here yet. She is quite patriotic. She will not have much to do with a young fellow that is able to go to war and will not go. I think I wrote you about their forming a company here which was to drill every evening from four o'clock until dark. Yesterday there was an order in the paper from the Governor for 50,000 more men to protect the state and the company expect to go today. There are a great many in that you know. There will be no one left hardly. But it is no more than they ought to do. I think it would be more credit to themselves to have went long ago when their country needed them as a great many others have done.

It was a great sacrifice to me and to you no doubt for you to leave home and its pleasures to fight for your country and I have not regretted that you went although I spend a great many lonely hours but that is nothing to what it would have been to had you staid at home and been called a coward and another thing your country needed you and why should I object to your going. But I am thankful I did not but instead told you to go. Did I object once? Did I not always say go! . . . We are going to make flannel shirts this afternoon for some that are going to have no friends here. There are going to be some of the ladies in to help. . . .

I am looking for another letter from you but have not got but one this week. I would much rather see the original than a letter although a letter is very acceptable. Have you got me your Photograph yet? Please get me a small one and send it to me and then you can get me a larger one some other time. They take very good ones here and I can get one for you if you would like to have one. But I must close. Write just as soon



This Mathew Brady photograph



and often as you can and tell me for certain if you are coming up home this Fall. Take good care of yourself and may you come home in good health is the prayer of your true wife. . . .

Jennie Thompson



Butler, September 14th, 1862

My own Dear William,

I received your kind letters this morning. I was very glad to hear that you were well but sorry to learn that you are going to Rolla for I do not think it will be as healthy there as at Benton Barracks. I would like very much to have stepped into your quarters while at St. Louis but I think Billy your bed must be very hard and I would not think that one blanket would be enough over you these nights, not if it is as cold there as it is here. Do you ever wish you had me for a bedfellow? I have wished you were here more than once when I would get ready for bed. But I feel in hopes that we can have that privilege before long, don't you? . . .

We made 11 flannel shirts yesterday. There was quite a number of girls in to help and it kept us working very busy. Solomon, Josiah and Coulter McCandless came down this morning before we went to church with the expectation of going in this company for they are very much afraid of being drafted and they thought if they went in this company they would not be drafted. When they got here they found out there would be no drafting done in that township so they went home feeling much better than when they came. . . .

I received a letter to-day from my Mother. . . . Mother would like to have you write them. I am very glad to have so many friends in the Regiment who take so much notice about your eating that they will divide their rations. I do not think much of your Colonel to make you do all the work and have to stay in camp so he will not have to be there only when he chooses. To be sure it is quite a compliment to you to think you do so well. But take the best of care of yourself and try and come home in the course of two or three weeks and let the

Colonel stay with the Regiment. You must come and see your mother. I think I will want to see you for indeed I do not think I could sleep if I knew you were coming as well as I like to sleep for you are not out of my mind hardly an hour in the day. But I hope we may both live to see the day when we will be at home contented and happy. This is the wish of your wife.

Jennie



Butler, September 16th, 1862

Dearest William,

Although it is now after 10 o'clock and the rest are all in bed I could not go to sleep until I had a short talk with you. Laurretta got word from John today for her to start to come where he was and so this afternoon she had some work to do and I took hold and helped her and she is all ready to start in the morning which she will do. She expects to get to Washington City Thursday evening if nothing happens. She did not know what to do when she got the letter for her to start because her Uncle Campbell objected to her going. I think if I could get such word and you seemed as anxious to see me as John is to see her I would like to see any Uncle or anything or anybody keep me at home.

I am well but feel some tired for I pared one bushel of peaches today and put them up and it was quite a job. . . . We were up quite early in the morning to see the soldiers off and went up town after breakfast and saw them start. After they started there was some of the girls took it into their heads to go with them as far as Shaw's between here and Pittsburgh where they were to take dinner. The soldiers went on to Pittsburgh last evening and the girls staid all night and came home today. . . .

I suppose you think I am making quite a stay here at John's but Solomon will be down for me this week. I am still anxious for you to come up this Fall. I have not said so much about your coming up as John has to Laurretta to go where he is. It does seem as though I had not seen you for so long. There is not an hour in the day but what I think of you more or less.

Do you think you will be at Rolla any length of time? I am so sorry you had to go there for I am afraid it will not be so healthy but I do hope you will keep well. Do you think you will be ready to come home in the Spring? I hope you will. I want you to shoot every rebel you can find and hurry and get this war to a close for this thing of living in excitement all the time is not very pleasant. Do you think of me very often? I do not want you to forget me. Write soon and often.

Your affectionate wife,
Jennie Thompson



Butler, September 18th, 1862

My own Dear William,

. . . I have not had any more letters from you since last Sunday. I think there are some for me at the other post office. I hope I may get one soon. I have thought more about getting one today than usual.

Yesterday I pared one bushel of peaches and canned them up so when you come home on furlough you can have some. I paid \$1.00 a bushel. They are quite small and there are not so many as were expected. It has been so dry. That was considerable to pay for them but I thought they would taste good in the winter and spring. What do you think about it, old gentleman?

The other night when I wrote to you I went to bed to dream of you as usual. I did not take it (the letter) to the office that night for it was very late and Laretta had to be up early for the stage and she said she would send the girl over in the morning with it. I woke up quite early in the morning hearing her talking to her Uncle. I jumped up and was going to tell her she need not send your letter for you were here for I had been dreaming that you had come to see me once more. I was very much disappointed for I was certain you were here. I hope I may not be disappointed very long. Please let the Colonel take charge of things a little while so you can come up even if you do not stay longer than three days. It would be a great consolation to me for when you was at home three weeks ago

last Sunday I did not see you at all hardly. There are so many to see you. Do please come if you can. But I am tired for I helped pare one bushel of tomatoes and put them up and I will close for this time. Take the best of care of yourself. Write soon and often and remember your true wife.

Jennie Thompson



Butler, September 19th, 1862

Dearest William,

I suppose you will be very glad to hear from me seeing I do not write very often. I have not written to you since last night and I thought you would be very anxious about me. When you get tired of hearing from me just let me know will you? . . .

We have been preparing lint all the afternoon then this evening I helped pare one bushel of peaches and after we were through with that we went to Mrs. Walker's and finished up the evening at fixing lint. They intend to send a box tomorrow I think to Harrisburg with lint and bandages for the wounded soldiers that are to be brought in from this last battle at Sharpsburg, which I suppose you will hear about before this reaches you. There were a great many felt bad for fear some of the Butler boys were in the fight but from all accounts they think they were not. . . .

I believe I would rather stay in one place than try to follow round after you men. Still if a person could get where you were once it would be very pleasant for the little while that we could stay. But if we have a few more such battles I think we will all be together again in a little while if God spares our lives. Oh, how I wish I could sleep with you tonight. Would you like to sleep with me? But I can only dream of being with you and that is very pleasant for I see you every night in my dreams. But I must close and go to bed alone for it is eleven now. . . .

May God protect you is the prayer from your loving wife,

Jennie Thompson

P.S. Send me a kiss, will you?

End of Part I

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